



## Deaf Actress to 'Dance With the Stars'

**Marlee Matlin Shows How Deaf World 'Hears' Music**

By **SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES**

Feb. 19, 2008 —

Marlee Matlin ¶ the Oscar-winning actress who has also starred in television shows from "West Wing" to "The L Word" will join the new season of "Dancing With the Stars."

Matlin's selection is a breakthrough for the hearing impaired, who say they are more often stigmatized by misconceptions than by their own limitations.

"I love to watch the program even though I don't have the volume on," wrote Lori DeWindt, who is deaf and grew up with deaf parents.

"It is inspiring to see different people compete given their backgrounds," said DeWindt, who is a mental health therapist at the Deaf and Wellness Center at the University of Rochester Medical Center. "It's nice to see that Marlee is up to the challenge."

Experts say learning to dance requires all the senses not just hearing, but sight, touch and rhythm.

Dance troupes at two of the largest universities that serve the deaf ¶ Gallaudet in Washington, D.C. and Rochester Institute for Technology in New York ¶ have been thriving for decades, performing to music for both hearing and nonhearing audiences.

### **30 Million Are Deaf**

About 30 million Americans have some degree of hearing loss, and that is all that they have in common. They represent a wide range those born profoundly deaf and others who suffered hearing loss as a result of illness or age.

Two or three children in 1,000 births have detectable hearing loss and half of all those older than 75 have hearing loss, according to the National Institute of Deafness.

"Marlee Matlin is [a] physically capable person we all knew and loved her as actress for many years," Angela Prince of USA Dance, the national governing body for ballroom dancing. "Dance has open arms and embraces everyone."

Singer Marie Osmond, one of the show's most popular stars, has a brother who is deaf and took dance classes, according to American Dancer Magazine.

"I understand that they would tap out the rhythm on his shoulder, and then he was off to the races," wrote editor Sean Fisher.

Entertainment Weekly's Lynette Rice reported several weeks ago that Matlin was in the cast line-up.

"They went after her, and it seems to make sense," she said. "They've established a trend to break prejudices ¶

we've seen it with Heather Mills [former wife of Paul McCartney who danced with a prosthetic] [and] to defy the odds."

Bob Pollard, a psychologist who works at the University of Rochester's Deaf Wellness Center, told ABCNEWS.com that the single greatest misconception about the deaf is that they live in total silence.

"That is almost never the case," he said. "The vast majority have some degree of residual hearing, especially in the low frequency arena. There are lots of people who enjoy music to varying degrees."

The deaf often "crank up the bass" on the stereo or put the speakers facedown on the floor, so the vibrations are "more obvious," according to Pollard. Others stand close to the speakers to maximize the reception.

## **Rock Band Interpreters**

Many rock bands hire their own interpreters so the deaf can enjoy their lyrics at concerts. For years, the Grateful Dead hired an onstage American Sign Language interpreter who was specifically trained for the arts and music, according to Pollard.

The deaf community ¶ which defines itself as a cultural group that shares American Sign Language ¶ also creates music and poetry, according to Pollard.

"Like poets who make clever and sophisticated use of sounds in English, ASL makes clever use of movement," he said. "Sign language also lends itself to dance and movement in obvious ways that a spoken language can't."

Martha Sheridan, a social worker at Gallaudet University, became deaf at age 3. Though she began ballet in kindergarten, her parents eventually stopped her lessons.

"Growing up in hearing schools was no easy matter," wrote Sheridan in an e-mail. "When my parents learned that I was deaf and saw that I was missing out on important communication in dance classes, they thought perhaps it wasn't the most fitting activity for me."

But Sheridan eventually joined a high school dance team.

"While I had difficulty with the day-to-day communication in the classroom and in social interactions, dance provided me with a place to fit in, to stand out and to contribute to my school," she said. "It gave me a sense of community, a sense of belonging and a way to communicate."

Sheridan did so well that in her junior year she was chosen from among Ohio high school dance team members for the top performance award. "It was the highlight of my high school years and I can't begin to tell you how much dance did for me," she said.

Later, she joined the Gallaudet Dance Company and toured as a hobby. The key is to work together to learn the rhythm. "Once we do, we all blend in and you'd never know the difference," she said.

ASL is the foundation of the Gallaudet Dance Company. Founded in 1955, it uses visual counting and hours of practice to help dancers develop an inner sense of timing. When teaching a new step, the director gives a sign count, similar to giving a verbal count with hearing dancers.

Occasionally, a drum beat is used; dancers also closely watch fellow dancers who may have better residual hearing.

## **Dancers Internalize Beat**

"The dancers internalize the music just as a drummer does," said Diane Hottendorf, director of the 15-girl troupe. "On the road once, we actually had the music stop, and the dancers came back ¶ right on count ¶ which a hearing person would not have been able to do."

According to Peter Pover, president of USA Dance, "The only impediment to dance is when we don't think we can do it."

He competed in amateur ballroom competitions for years even against two successful dancers who were hearing impaired.

"My wife is in her late 70s and is almost completely deaf, and she manages to dance fairly well," Pover said. "It's all about moving one tiny little point between their mutual solar plexus. The movement of one person draws the other and it doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman."

Interest in learning dance spiked 30 percent last year because of "Dancing With the Stars," according to Pover. "When we negotiate for a hotel to run our national championships, they look at us differently. We get a big audience now."

Many in the deaf world say Matlin's dancing might change how people view deafness, which they say is a strong, unique culture not a disability.

"The issue is not so much that we are deaf dancers, but that we are dancers just like any other dancer," said Sheridan. "Dance is a talent that some people have, just like baseball is a talent to others."

"When you have talent you want to use it, and express yourself through it," she said. "When you do, it enriches your life, and it becomes a part of who you are, but it also connects us to and enriches the lives of others."

Copyright © 2008 ABC News Internet Ventures